

## Ancestor Worship - Ancestors In Africa And Asia

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In his work among the Tallensi of Ghana, Meyer Fortes emphasizes the significance of ancestor worship to patrilineage unification and lineage or segment differentiation. In particular, the father–oldest surviving son relationship is emphasized, the latter having the primary responsibility for performing the appropriate rituals and service. In general, placement of an African ancestral shrine and the performance of its services can also relate to and influence descendants' genealogical position and seniority.

In China, Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and folk concepts have contributed to the practice of ancestor worship in which heads of patrilineages are emphasized but other patrilineal relatives are included. There are three prominent sites for ancestor worship: family shrines, lineage halls, and tombs or graveyards of relatives. Proper placement and orientation of the latter will take geomancy (*feng-shui*) into account. Physical remains of the deceased are laid to rest in the tomb/grave-yard, which serves as the site of public rituals; ancestral tablets represent the deceased in shrine and temple, in which their spirits are housed, and for which more private and personal observances are made. While the ancestors wield significant authority and influence in the lives of their living descendants, the latter care for and look after their ancestors—for example, by burning paper money at New Year's to contribute to their ancestors' bounty or prosperity.

**Man with mummified remains of ancestor.** In certain cultures, ancestors are seen as intermediaries between people and the gods, and it is believed that their involvement in the day-to-day happenings of the family does not end with death. © CHRIS RAINIER/CORBIS

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Japanese ancestors are also emphasized on the father's side, and their worship is primarily related to Buddhist beliefs and practices. The

deceased receive a posthumous or "Buddhist" name, which is written on a tablet and kept in the family's *butsudan* or Buddhist altar; Buddhist funerary services help purify the corpse from the polluting influences of death. Other services include "death day" memorial services for up to fifty years, New Year's and Bon (or Obon) celebrations, and household prayers. While tradition maintains a differentiation between stem and branch families and a main ancestral altar in the stem house, more modern practice has individual families establishing their own *butsudan* with the death of a household member. Proper care for the ancestors and observance of appropriate services, offerings, and prayers are believed not only to help the ancestors be restful and in peace, but also to result in blessings and good fortune for the descendants.

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